Can parties recruit postal voters? Experimental evidence from Britain

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While easily-accessible postal voting is on the rise in many countries, the implications for electoral campaigns are largely under-researched. Indeed, parties actively try to sign supporters up to postal votes to make it easier for them to turn out. But how effective are these efforts to recruit supporters on to postal votes? We present an original, pre-registered postal voter recruitment experiment – the first conducted outside the US – completed during the May 2018 UK elections. We test the effect of a common recruitment tactic – letters and application forms sent to supporters. Despite being widely used by parties, we find that these efforts are ineffective at both recruiting and mobilising supporters. While the rewards of successfully signing supporters up to postal voting are potentially substantial, our results suggest that parties should consider the most effective ways of doing so.

Keywords: field experiment; postal voting; absentee voting; turnout; campaigns; United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

Postal voting[1], in line with other forms of early or 'absentee' voting, is a growing phenomenon internationally (McAllister and Muller 2018). Historically speaking, allowing some citizens to cast their ballots prior to election day was a wartime procedure, introduced in order to allow soldiers who were stationed overseas or away from home to participate in elections (Fortier 2006; ODPM 2004). Nowadays, forms of early and absentee voting are widespread in many countries as election authorities have relaxed restrictions on their use (McAllister and Muller 2018). The result is that votes cast by post are an increasingly important aspect of modern elections. In the 2012 US presidential contest, for instance, almost one in three voters cast their ballots before election day (McDonald 2017). In states such as Oregon and Washington, almost all votes are cast by mail (Alvarez et al. 2012). In Australia, almost one in three voters cast their ballot prior to election day, and around one in ten registered voters use postal votes to do so (McAllister and Muller 2018).

Despite this, however, the implications of accessible postal voting for party campaigns are largely under-studied (McAllister and Muller 2018). For instance, the rise in postal voting has implications for the planning of electoral campaigns. As more and more voters can now cast their ballots prior to election day itself, there are now effectively "multiple polling dates" that local parties and candidates have to prepare for (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010, 242). In addition to the 'in-person' polling day, a substantial and increasing block of voters now receive and cast their ballots several

[1] Or 'Vote-By-Mail' in US parlance.

weeks prior to this. While parties adapt to these trends, many have looked to ways in which they can exploit the accessibility of postal voting in many countries to maximise turnout of their party's supporters.

The traditional scholarly view of electoral campaigns is that parties aim to maximise their vote share by mobilising party supporters (Johnston et al. 2012). Recently however, parties have begun to incorporate postal voting into their mobilisation efforts by trying to sign would-be supporters up to postal votes. For instance, scholars have noted this trend in the US (Hassell 2017) and Australia (Kelly 2011, 133; McAllister and Muller 2018, 104). In Britain, too, parties are doing just this. At the 2010 general election campaign, Kavanagh and Cowley noted that parties were making "considerable efforts to sign up would-be supporters for postal votes" (2010, 242). By 2017, the same authors noted that such practices were a "major" aspect of local campaigning (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018: 303).

The rewards of doing so, from a campaign's perspective, are attractive. By recruiting supporters to postal votes, parties believe that they will be more likely to actually vote due to the convenience of doing so by post (Hassell 2017). Having supporters vote by post in advance of polling day means parties' votes are effectively 'banked' before the traditional, in-person polling day. Furthermore, by securing their votes early at the postal vote deadline stage, precious campaign resources can be spared for the crucial, labour-intensive *Get Out The Vote* (GOTV) efforts needed later in the campaign (Issenberg 2013, 298). Securing votes early can also minimise the potential damage of exogenous shocks that might depress desired turnout among supporters on election

day. Ultimately, should recruiting postal voters lead to a favourable differential level of overall turnout, parties will be able to enjoy a larger share of the overall votes cast.

However, academic research into these practices and the efficacy of the same is limited. While we have evidence on the impact of campaigns designed to increase voter registration in the United States (e.g. Nickerson 2015) and in Europe (e.g. Braconnier et al. 2017), we know little about how effective parties' efforts to recruit postal voters are. This paper sheds light on this question by testing the effectiveness of an often-used postal voter recruitment tactic. We test the effect of letters sent by a party to supporters encouraging them to sign up to postal voting on two outcomes: (1) postal voter registration, and (2) turnout. We report the results of a field experiment conducted in collaboration with the Liberal Democrats in London during the 2018 local elections, involving 3,340 party supporters. We find that letters sent from Liberal Democrat candidate(s) encouraging postal voting registration and enclosed postal vote application forms are ineffective at signing up postal voters. Further, supporters who were sent letters were no more likely to vote at the election in May. The findings suggest that letter-based tactics, as well as more personal methods, should be tested in different electoral and geographical contexts to confirm these results.

Our study makes several contributions to existing research. Firstly, we present (to our knowledge) the first postal voter recruitment experiment to be conducted outside the United States in order to shed light on a widely under-researched aspect of local campaign practices (McAllister and Muller 2018). We build on existing mobilisation studies by examining whether a party can turn out its supporters (and thereby increase its vote share) by encouraging them to change the way they vote, rather than through

direct GOTV mobilisation (e.g. Green and Gerber 2015). Secondly, our study adds to the literature on the effect of partisan campaign contact on political behaviour. Finally, given that letters with enclosed application forms represent a common recruitment tactic (Kelly 2011, 133), our study highlights the need for parties to test the efficacy of their practices.

The main body of this paper proceeds as follows. We provide a theoretical argument that hypothesises the expected effects of treatment assignment (later defined) on both postal voter registration as well as electoral participation. Subsequently, we provide a detailed description of the experimental design and the operationalisation of the treatment variable and the potential outcomes. Finally, we analyse the main results of the experiment and engage in a discussion of the implications of the same before providing concluding remarks.

2. Accessible Postal Voting and Local Campaigns

Postal voting is a growing phenomenon internationally (McAllister and Muller 2018, see also: (Karp and Banducci 2000; Qvortrup 2005; Rallings et al. 2010). In Britain too, postal voting has been on the rise in recent years (see Figure 1). At the 1997 general election, only 937,205 postal ballots were issued, representing just two per cent of all electors (Cracknell 2014). In 2001, the rules were changed to make it possible for any individual to get a postal vote on demand. Postal voters typically receive their ballots several weeks before polling day and can either post it for free to their local electoral authority or deliver it in-person to the polling station on election day. Shortly after the rule change came into effect, at the 2001 general election, the

number of postal ballots issued rose to 1.8 million (representing four per cent of electors). But by 2017, over eight million ballots were issued (eighteen per cent of electors) (Rallings and Thrasher 2015; Electoral Commission 2017). In some constituencies in the North East of England, where accessible postal votes were originally piloted, over fifty per cent of votes are now cast by post (Cracknell 2014).

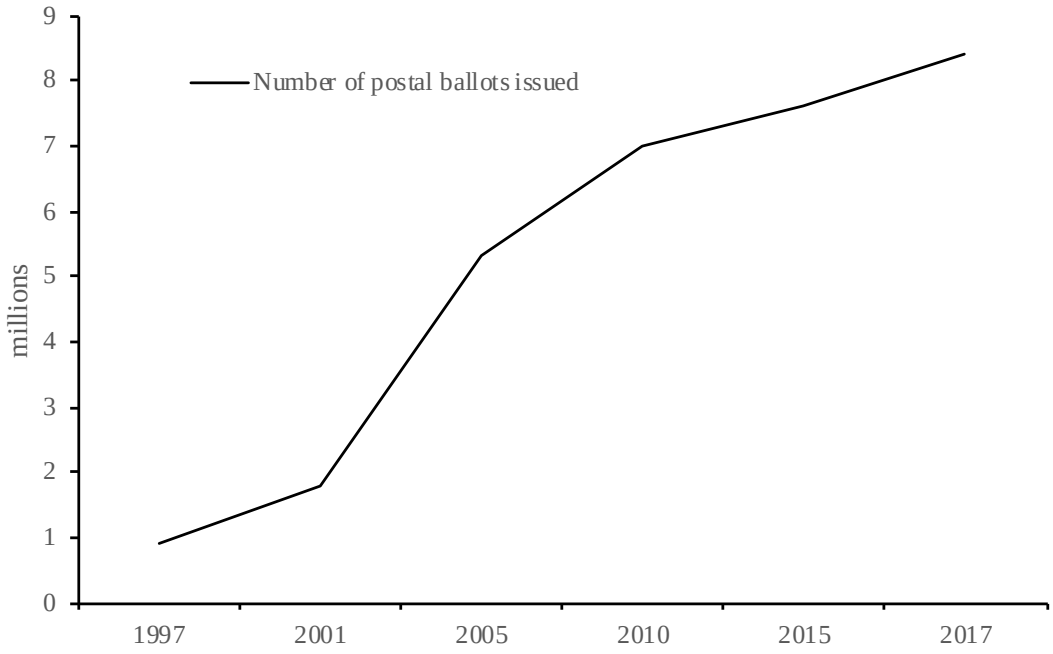

Figure 1: Number of postal vote ballots issued at UK general elections, 1997-2017 (Cracknell 2014; Rallings and Thrasher 2015; Electoral Commission 2017)

Postal votes represent a significant – and growing – proportion of total votes cast because turnout among postal voters is consistently higher than that observed among traditional, in-person voters (Rallings et al. 2010; Rallings and Thrasher 2014). At the 2015 UK general election, for instance, turnout among postal voters was eighty-six per cent compared to sixty-three per cent among in-person voters (Uberoi 2015). It is possible that this is simply due to selection effects; i.e., those who apply for postal

votes are more politically-interested. Additionally, and alternatively, it could be that the association is causal, if it is the convenience of voting early and by post that raises turnout (Hassell 2017). It is unclear whether the mechanism is causal, or due to selection effects, but ultimately, due to increased take-up and high turnout, postal voting is an increasingly important aspect of modern elections.

Parties increasingly aim to capitalise on this by encouraging supporters (i.e. registered voters they have identified as being sympathetic to them) on to postal votes (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010; Kelly 2011; Hassell 2017). In their account of the 2017 general election in Britain, Cowley and Kavanagh note that "signing up supporters for postal votes is now a major part of campaign activity, as parties know that they are more likely to be returned than conventional votes" (2018: 303). For parties, the strategy is clear: get supporters signed up to postal votes to maximise turnout. In this study, we test the efficacy of these efforts on both postal voter registration and turnout. But why would we expect these efforts to affect either of these?

From one perspective, the convenience of voting by post should appeal to some voters. According to classic Downsian cost-benefit analysis, an individual will vote when they perceive that the benefits outweigh the costs (Downs, 1957). It is normally assumed that the costs of voting – such as those associated with walking to the polling station on election day – are fixed. However, postal votes can reduce such costs substantially (Mann and Mayhew 2015; Li, Pomantell and Schraufnagel 2018). This has been a prevalent argument in the United States, where the roll-out of mass postal voting has occurred in states such as Oregon (Southwell and Burchett 2000). After receiving their ballot paper several weeks before the election, voters can complete it in their own

home and simply post it back at a convenient time. This reduces the possibility of unforeseen circumstances preventing participation on election day. Of note, for example, is that excessive rainfall – a meteorological occurrence certainly commonplace within the UK context – has been found to negatively impact electoral turnout (Arnold and Freier 2016; Artés 2014). During low saliency contests, such as that of local or subnational elections, when the incentive to participate is low, it is especially important for parties to find an efficient means of encouraging turnout amongst party sympathisers as a marginal difference in turnout is more likely to have an effect on the electoral outcome. By emphasising the convenience of postal voting, we would expect such efforts to work.

Empirical evidence tends to support this expectation. For instance, research shows that campaigns designed to stimulate voter registration can be effective. Obama's 2008 presidential campaign included an ambitious registration drive across the United States that was credited with registering half a million voters in one state alone (Shear and Gardner 2008). However, given that such campaigns may have contacted citizens who are more engaged and thus more likely to register to vote anyway, experimental research can overcome the confounding issues of endogeneity and aid the isolation of causality. Experiments by Nickerson (2015) and Braconnier et al. (2017), for instance, find that voter registration campaigns increase registration by 4.4 percentage points, and between one and nine points, respectively. Classroom presentations to college students have also been found to be effective, increasing registration by six percentage points (Bennion and Nickerson 2016). Meanwhile, methods such as e-mails appear to have minimal (Nickerson 2007), or even negative (Bennion and Nickerson 2011)

effects. Experiments conducted among unregistered subjects, therefore, give reason to expect that parties can indeed influence voter registration.

Existing studies also suggest that campaigns are able to successfully encourage those who are already registered to apply for postal voting instead. Some studies find that treatment involving a paper-based application process increases the use of voting by mail (Mann 2011). In their experiment in California, Monroe and Sylvester (2011) found that twenty per cent of those assigned to receive a postcard encouraging them to apply for postal voting did so, compared to just ten per cent of the control group. Mann and Mayhew (2015) also tested the effect of a postcard sent to subjects in the US state of Maine. They found that those assigned to receive the postcards were 5.3 percentage points more likely to request a postal vote than the control group. There is thus strong evidence to suggest that voters are susceptible to efforts to change their type of voting status and therefore clear potential for the same persuasive power to be observed for political parties.

Evidence on partisan-based efforts to recruit supporters to postal votes is limited. While there is evidence that contact from a preferred-party can be particularly effective when it comes to mobilising turnout (Foos and de Rooij, 2017), to our knowledge, only one published study has involved partisan encouragements to change supporters' registration status to postal voting. Hassell's (2017) experiment tested the effect of letters sent by the Republican Party urging Republican supporters to vote-by-mail in Minnesota in 2016. In line with existing non-partisan experiments (Mann and Mayhew 2015; Monroe and Sylvester 2011), Hassell found that letters were successful in changing the way subjects voted in the election. There is, therefore, good reason to

expect that parties can successfully recruit voters to postal votes. There is experimental evidence that campaigns designed to register voters have been successful, while a number of studies provide evidence that voters who are already registered can be encouraged to apply for postal voting.

Does postal voting increase turnout? Both experiment and observation evidence is mixed. For instance, experiments by Mann and Mayhew (2015) and Hassell (2017) find that those encouraged to request a mail ballot vote at a higher rate. In their natural experiment, meanwhile, Kousser and Mullin (2007) find that when citizens are involuntarily forced to vote by mail, turnout falls. A study in Switzerland estimates that the roll out of postal voting across cantons between 1970 and 2005 increased turnout by 4.1 percentage points on average (Luechinger et al. 2007). In their US study, Li, Pomantell, and Schrausnagel (2018) find that turnout is higher in states that have, among other factors that also reduce the costs of voting, accessible postal voting. Other observational studies likewise find that vote-by-mail boosts turnout (e.g., Gronke et al. 2008; Gerber, Huber, and Hill 2013; Karp and Banducci 2001), but others find little or no effect (Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Hanmer and Traugott 2004; Berinsky 2005; Fitzgerald 2005).

There is, therefore, cautious reason to expect parties' efforts to recruit supporters on to postal votes to subsequently increase their likelihood of voting. In addition, experiments show that just being contacted by a party can stimulate turnout (e.g. Foos and de Rooij 2017; Townsley 2018). Evidence suggests that the effect is particularly strong among those already inclined to support the party (Foos and John 2018).

Therefore, we might reasonably expect parties' postal voter recruitment efforts to increase turnout in addition to postal voter registration.

3. Research Design

We carried out a pre-registered[2] field experiment with the Liberal Democrats in Southwark, London during the United Kingdom local elections in May 2018. As our experiment represents the first of its kind in the UK, we replicate the letter-based approach that has been successful in US studies (e.g. Mann and Mayhew 2015; Hassell 2017). Letters, with enclosed postal vote application forms represent a common tactic with which parties try to recruit postal voters (Kelly 2011, 133). Testing treatments in different electoral contexts is an important scientific endeavour that serves to increase the external validity and generalisability of experimental research (Mann and Mayhew 2015). As highlighted, however, in addition to contributing to our understanding of how individuals can be recruited to postal voting, we include a partisan element for two main reasons. Firstly, existing literature on the comparative power of partisan contact (versus non-partisan contact) is mixed. For instance, while Foos and de Rooij (2017) find that partisan cues aimed at driving participation can be more effective than non-partisan efforts, other studies find that partisan cues add little to the efficacy of campaign contact (Cardy 2005; Condon et al. 2016). Our study aims, therefore, to shed further light on the role and power of partisan appeals. Secondly, parties in the UK are actively engaged in recruiting supporters as postal voters, but the empirical research

[2] The experiment was pre-registered at EGAP (Evidence in Government and Politics). Pre-registration details and pre-analysis plan can be found here: http://egap.org/registration-details/4404.

into the efficacy of these efforts is thin. The paper aims, therefore, to test the efficiency of partisan campaign strategies that are organically occurring "in the field". The choice of party was selected due to their willingness to take part in the experiment, with Southwark being chosen due to the number of registered voters who had been identified, by the local party, as Liberal Democrat supporters. The party has also been a major political contender locally in recent general and local elections.

Ahead of the election, we compiled a list of 3,340 registered voters that the party had identified, through prior canvassing, as being likely Liberal Democrat supporters. We focused on those supporters who had not voted regularly at previous local elections. Given that this was the target group of voters that the party was actively involved in recruiting as a means of providing them with a marginal electoral advantage, we sought to replicate the efforts that the party was already undertaking to provide an empirical test of their existing strategy. This strategy is supported by experimental evidence that shows that campaigns are most effective among those on the 'cusp' between voting and abstaining – as opposed to voters who reliably vote or abstain (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009).

Voters from this list were first clustered into their households. We then randomly assigned 1,500 households to a treatment group, and the remaining 1,583 households to a control group.[3] Figure 2 summarises the random assignment processes and final sample sizes.

[3] None of the 3,083 households with identified supporters included in the sample received any form of partisan communication or canvassing from the local Liberal Democrats between March and election day in May. Therefore, only the 1639 individuals residing in the 1,500 households subjected to treatment received any direct communication from the local party.

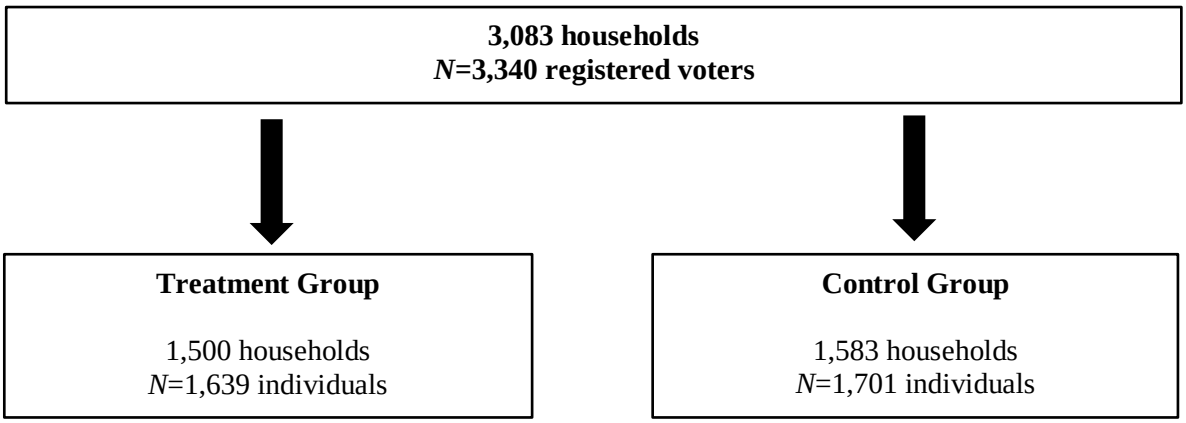

Figure 2: Random assignment process

To validate the balance of the randomisation process, we conduct a balance test. Figure 3 presents the balance of available pre-treatment covariates including past voting behaviour and registration type across treatment and control groups. The balance check confirms that there were no substantial differences in the proportion of pre-existing postal voters between the Treatment and Control groups.[4]

[4] The balance between treatment and control groups is also verified statistically via the procedure recommended by Gerber and Green (2012, 109). We run a logistic regression using treatment assignment as the dependent variable and apply pre-treatment covariates (gender, past turnout, past registration type, polling district, and ward). The full result of this test is presented in the Appendix (Table A1) and shows that there was no significant relationship between any of the identified covariates and treatment assignment.

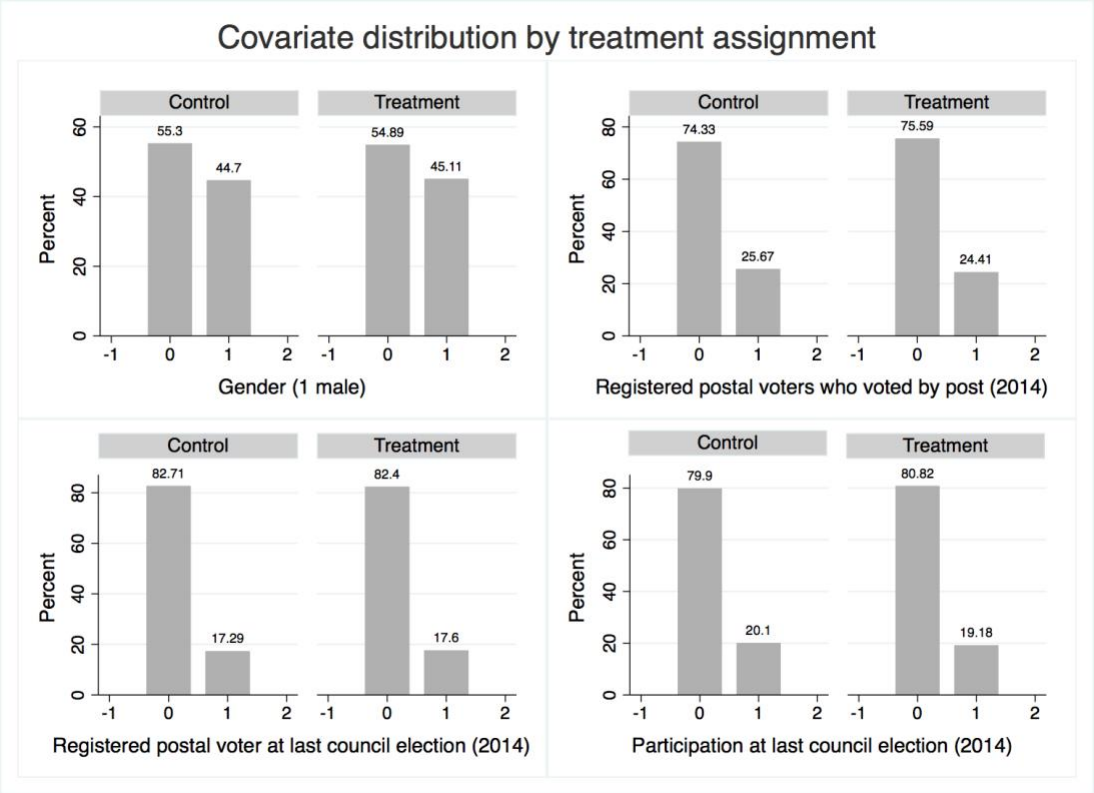

Figure 3: Balance test

Seven weeks before the election, the treatment group was sent a personalised letter from the party's local candidates in each ward, encouraging them to apply for a postal vote (Figure 4). The letter applies a more 'convenience-focussed' message than the letters in Hassell's (2017) study. The letters sent by Hassell "encouraged voters not to "let their voter record suffer"" and reminded subjects that voting by mail is a "great way to make sure your vote counts" (Hassell 2017, 3). Our letters stress the expediency of postal voting ("make it easier for you to vote") and assure subjects that postal voting reduces the likelihood of being unable to participate. Recipients are asked to either apply for a postal vote online, or by completing and returning a postal voter application form that was enclosed with the letter. The letter also features the party's branding and mentions local political issues at stake in the election such as "housing, crime and the environment".

Figure 4: Postal voter recruitment letter

4. Results

Our study has two dependent variables – (1) postal voter registration, and (2) participation at the May 2018 local election. Our approach differs slightly from Hassell's (2017) experiment by directly measuring the effect of letters on postal voter registration and turnout in turn, rather than whether voters cast their ballots by mail.

This decision is based on the notion that parties aim to recruit supporters on to postal voting. This, from parties' perspective, should then lead to a higher level of turnout among the newly-recruited postal voters. To test these two propositions, we measure each in turn.

To calculate postal voter registration, the electoral register was obtained through the local party on the twenty-sixth of April (one week prior to polling day), the final electoral register update before in-person voting began. The register provided data on whether or not individuals are registered to vote by post, which was then matched to the experimental records. Postal voter registration is thus recorded as a binary indicator (1 = successfully applied for a postal vote, 0 = did not successfully apply for a postal vote). To measure the second outcome variable – voter turnout – the official marked registers were obtained from the local authority shortly after the May 2018 local elections and matched to the experimental records. As there is no way to measure compliance (i.e. whether recipients read the letter), the estimator used to measure results is the intent-to-treat (ITT) effect[5] (Gerber and Green 2012).

The results of the experiment are presented in Table 1. The first row shows the proportion of voters in each group that successfully applied for a postal vote by the end of the campaign. The second row presents the turnout rate in the control and treatment groups at the 2018 local election.

[5] This can be summarised as:

$$ITT_Y = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} Y_i\,(z = 1) - \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} Y_i\,(z = 0)$$

$Y_i\,(z = 1)$ is the potential outcome for individual *i* under treatment assignment and $Y_i(z = 0)$ is the potential outcome for *i* under assignment to control.

Table 1: Postal voter registration and turnout by experimental group

	Control	Letter
Percentage registered to vote by post	16.87%	16.84%
(*n*)	(287)	(276)
Turnout	35.80%	37.22%
(*n*)	(609)	(610)
N	1,701	1,639

As Table 1 shows, there were no substantive differences between the control and treatment groups in terms of (1) postal voter registration, and (2) turnout. The control and treatment groups had a near-identical proportion of voters registered to vote by post (16.87% and 16.84%, respectively), indicating that the personalised letter and forms were unsuccessful in their aim to recruit party supporters to postal votes. The rate of turnout in each group is also similar, suggesting the letters also had no effect on mobilising subjects to vote. The turnout rate of both the control and treatment group is larger than the general rate of participation observed across Southwark in the election (33.59%). This is to be expected given that the subjects selected for inclusion in the experimental design phase were identified partisan supporters who are more likely to turnout than the wider electorate. The overall turnout in 2018 was, however, lower than that observed during the previous local elections in 2014 (36.15%).

Table 2: Modelled Intent-To-Treat effect (ITT) of letters on postal voter recruitment and turnout

	Postal voter recruitment	Voter turnout
ITT	-0.03	1.42
	[-2.68, 2.61]	[-2.03, 4.86]

	(1.35)	(1.76)
ITT	0.44	1.66
covariate-	[-2.43, 3.31]	[-1.82, 5.15]
adjusted	(1.46)	(1.78)
N	3,340	3,340

Note: [95%-confidence intervals]
(Robust standard errors clustered at the household level)

Table 2 presents the modelled effect estimates from regressing the outcome variables on assignment, with and without covariates.[6] Given the small value of the point estimate of the ITT in both the simple (-0.03) and covariate-adjusted (1.46) models, we are unable to confirm that the effect on postal voter recruitment is significantly distinct from zero. The same is observed in the case of the ITT on voter turnout. The sample size involved (3,340) is smaller than the 5,717 involved in Hassell's (2017) US experiment. The sample size involved in this study is potentially limiting. To detect effect sizes of 1-2 percentage points, the optimal sample size would need to be around three times larger[7]. Regardless, even if the true effect in this study was of this magnitude, it would represent a small substantive effect given the costs involved with this tactic. For example, our treatments cost £0.53 per letter to produce and post, in line with costs found in most *GOTV* studies of between $0.50 and $0.75 per letter (Green and Gerber 2015, 51). As Green and Gerber (2015) note, an effect size of 1-2 percentage points represents a poor return on such costs.

[6] The pre-treatment covariates include: gender, 2014 turnout, 2014 registration type, polling district, and ward.

[7] Given an effect size of two percentage points and the fixed sample sized used (n=3340) in the experiment, the present test wields an estimated power for a two-sample proportions test of 0.44. To obtain optimum power (0.8) and return a Pearson's chi-squared test at significant ($p<0.05$) levels, the total sample size would ideally be 9124 (see Figures A2 and A3 in the appendix).

In order to ensure the validity of the null effect, we also submit the data to an additional robustness check by testing for the presence of influential cases that may drive the non-effect of treatment assignment. The full results of this check are reported in the Appendix (Figure A1), and show that no single electoral ward exhibits an influential effect over the data. Therefore, we find strong evidence to reject the primary hypothesis presented in this paper. Despite efforts to the same, the Liberal Democrats are unable to recruit their supporters to postal voter status.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In our study, letters encouraging party supporters to change their registration status to postal voting were found to be ineffective. Party supporters who were encouraged by local candidates to apply for a postal vote were no more likely to register for a postal vote than the control group. Nor were they any more likely to participate at the local election than the control group. However, while our study produces null effects, this does not necessarily mean such tactics should be disregarded altogether.

Firstly, it is possible that the relative unpopularity of the national Liberal Democrats reduced the efficacy of the treatment. Indeed, there is evidence that voters in Britain are more likely to mobilise in response to appeals from their favoured party and de-mobilise when contacted by a party they do not favour (Foos and John 2018). While nationally-unpopular, the party is not particularly unpopular in Southwark, having finished second place in the borough's 2014 and 2018 local elections, securing 20% and 23% of the vote, respectively. Moreover, the population of individuals included in

the sample were identified party supporters so we assume that potential for the relative (un)popularity of the party should not exhibit any significant influence on the effect of treatment assignment. However, given the Labour-dominated nature of the area, it remains to be seen whether the efforts of a more popular party would have been more effective.

Secondly, the nature of our experimental population could have rendered our treatments less effective. For instance, it could be that our London-based experimental population simply included fewer voters to whom postal voting is typically most appealing – namely, older and rural voters (Kelly 2011). While the efforts of a more popular local party could yield stronger effects, it is also possible that the younger, more urban nature of the experimental setting meant that our efforts fell on infertile ground. Future research, therefore, might consider whether postal voter recruitment efforts are more effective in less densely-populated geographical areas. The decision to target supporters who did not have a 100% turnout record at previous local elections could also be significant. As Monroe and Sylvester (2011) note, due to infrequent voters' tendency to make their minds up later in the campaign, the benefits of voting early are less apparent. However, parties should not give up on testing how best to turn out non-voting supporters, as they ultimately represent a favourable group of the electorate to mobilise.

Prima facie, our findings appear to contrast with those detected by Hassell (2017) in his partisan vote-by-mail experiment in the US. While Hassell did not directly measure postal voter registration as we have in this study, he found that supporters who were sent letters by the Republican Party encouraging them to vote by mail were around

one percentage point more likely to do so. Given that the confidence intervals surrounding our effect estimates overlap, we are reluctant to state that our findings contradict those of Hassell (2017). Nevertheless, it is possible that the convenience-focussed message in our treatments provided a weaker stimulus to respondents than the 'social responsibility' messages used in Hassell's study. Testing further variation in messaging can shed further light on the efficacy of postal voter recruitment tactics.

Given these limitations, future research into how parties can effectively recruit postal voters – and the effect of this on their likelihood to vote – remains a worthy endeavour. Indeed, our findings are not to say that partisan efforts to recruit supporters on to postal votes cannot work. Rather, our study highlights the need for these efforts to be guided by evidence on their efficacy. Future research might also consider testing the effect of recruiting postal voters through face-to-face interactions, which have been shown to successfully register (e.g. Braconnier et al. 2017; Nickerson 2015) and mobilise (Green and Gerber 2015) voters in other studies. Indeed, our recruitment efforts were relatively 'light touch' compared to some methods used by GOTV campaigns, such as face-to-face canvassing or social pressure mailings, that tend to produce much stronger effects (Green and Gerber 2015). Future research, therefore, might consider whether personal appeals, or the use of social pressure messaging such as telling voters that most of their neighbours use postal votes, echo results found in GOTV studies.

The role that postal voting plays, and could play, for party campaigns, including how parties can best mobilise supporters by recruiting them on to postal votes, remains of interest. The 'prize' associated with encouraging supporters to vote at a higher rate using postal votes (and to vote early) merits further research. If parties can use postal

voting more widely to maximise their vote share, then this could radically alter how local campaigns are fought. Further, if future research finds that postal voting increases overall participation, then this could be an avenue worth pursuing by governments and electoral authorities as a means to increase voter turnout at elections.

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Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix:

Table A1: Balance test (ii) Binomial logistic regression of treatment assigned on identified pre-treatment covariates

VARIABLES	(Balance Test) Treatment assignment
Gender (1 male)	0.00858
	(0.0765)
Past turnout	-0.0834
	(0.110)
Past registration type	0.0163
	(0.112)
Past postal vote	0.0177
	(0.229)
Electoral Ward:	
GG	-0.747
	(0.645)
LBWB	0.0783
	(0.768)
NB	-0.0549
	(0.637)
ROT	-0.214
	(0.403)
SB	-0.780
	(1.162)
SDO	-0.213
	(0.253)
STG	-0.308
	(0.275)
VIL	0.100
	(0.548)
Polling district	
2.pollingdistrict	0.181
	(0.284)
3.pollingdistrict	0.409
	(0.303)
4.pollingdistrict	0.00601
	(0.259)
5o.pollingdistrict	-
6.pollingdistrict	0.680
	(0.683)
7.pollingdistrict	0.675
	(0.692)
8.pollingdistrict	-0.0603
	(0.792)

9.pollingdistrict	0.732
	(1.519)
10o.pollingdistrict	-
11.pollingdistrict	-0.149
	(0.773)
12.pollingdistrict	-0.377
	(0.766)
13.pollingdistrict	-0.0871
	(0.772)
14.pollingdistrict	0.450
	(1.174)
15.pollingdistrict	0.856
	(1.137)
16.pollingdistrict	0.847
	(0.711)
17.pollingdistrict	0.686
	(1.024)
18.pollingdistrict	0.145
	(0.815)
19.pollingdistrict	-0.0748
	(0.710)
20.pollingdistrict	0.259
	(0.635)
21.pollingdistrict	-0.279
	(0.674)
22.pollingdistrict	-0.134
	(0.629)
23.pollingdistrict	0.0815
	(0.456)
24.pollingdistrict	0.291
	(0.439)
25.pollingdistrict	-0.301
	(0.411)
26.pollingdistrict	0.0870
	(0.422)
27.pollingdistrict	-0.220
	(0.644)
28.pollingdistrict	0.906
	(1.159)
29.pollingdistrict	0.517
	(1.162)
30.pollingdistrict	0.400
	(1.177)
31.pollingdistrict	0.933
	(1.269)
32.pollingdistrict	-0.00333
	(1.061)
33.pollingdistrict	0.170

	(0.256)
34.pollingdistrict	0.523
	(0.332)
35.pollingdistrict	0.236
	(0.299)
36.pollingdistrict	-0.205
	(0.279)
37o.pollingdistrict	-
38.pollingdistrict	1.375
	(1.371)
39.pollingdistrict	-0.359
	(0.701)
40.pollingdistrict	-0.828
	(0.719)
41.pollingdistrict	-0.136
	(0.632)
42o.pollingdistrict	-
43o.pollingdistrict	-
Constant	0.0571
	(0.194)
Observations	2,854

Robust clustered standard errors (two-tailed) in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Influential Cases Check

In order test for the presence of influential cases that may drive the non-effect of treatment assignment, we run a battery of additional estimations comparing the ITT of different subsamples from the experimental subject pool to ensure that the effect size remains the same across different subpopulations. Figure 4 displays the outputs of these tests and shows the ITT coefficients using subsamples removing one ward at a time from the overall sample to ensure that no one ward is exhibiting an influential effect over the data. Randomisation should ensure that such an influential effect does

not occur, but because of the temporal horizon between treatment assignment and the date the dependent variables are measured (i.e. election day) it may be the case that some other effect unique to a specific electoral ward, for example, confounds the effect size of the treatment assignment. As shown, however, this is not the case. The ITT across all possible ward-based subsamples remains very close to zero.

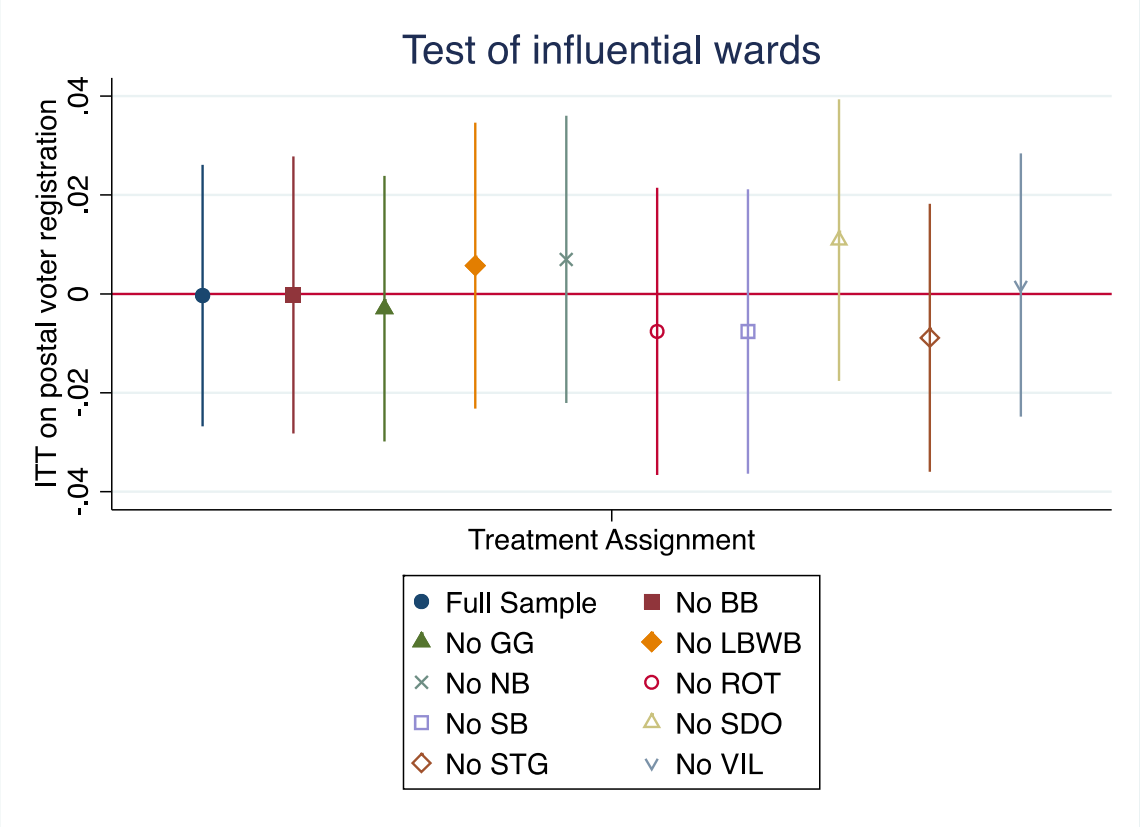

Figure A2: Robustness Check

Power tests:

Power tests completed in STATA15 using the following syntax:

power twoproportions 0.17 0.19, n(3340) onesided

power twoproportions 0.17 0.19, p(.80) onesided

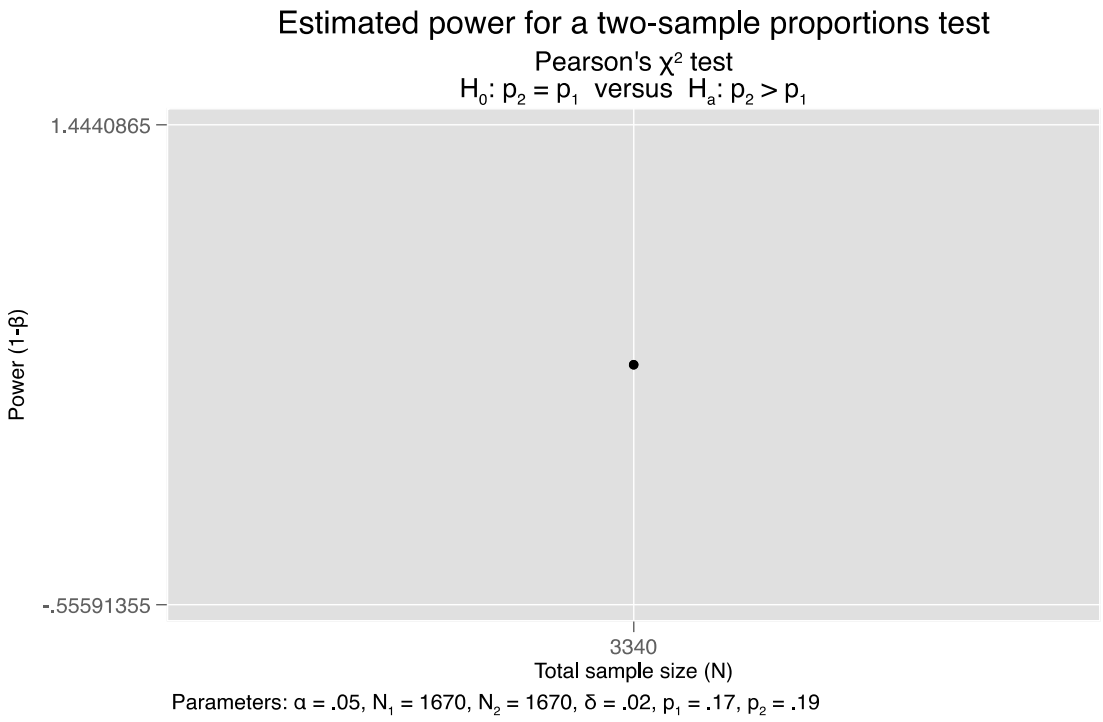

Figure A2: Estimated power test of fixed sample size (one-tailed)

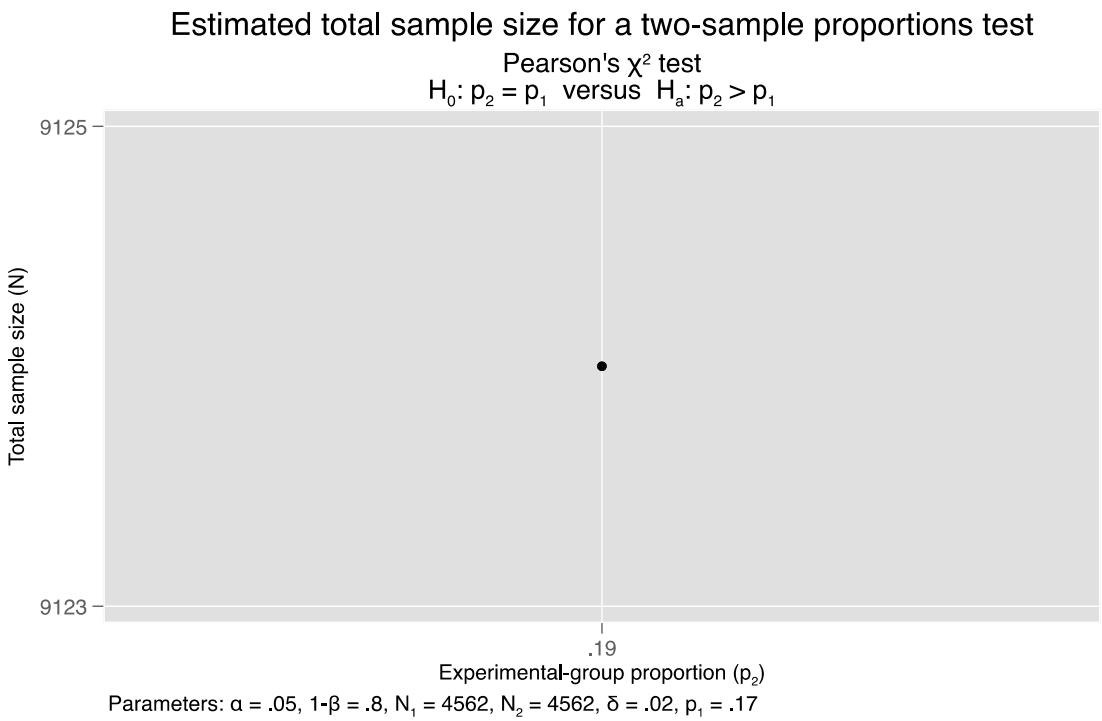

Figure A3: Estimated sample size for optimal [0.8] power (one-tailed)